Surprises Theatrical and Academic World by Turning Out Successful Dramatists

Prof. George Pierce Baker Has Remarkable Success in Teaching the Art of Play Writing to Students of "English 47" Course at Harvard

WHEN it became known seven years ago that Harvard had instituted a course in play writing both the theatrical and the academic world shook their heads. Theatrical managers and dramatists affirmed that there were no rules for writing plays—that it could not be taught. The acadamic world asserted that plays, excepting those of Shakespeare and a few others, were not literature and were not worthy of being studied at Harvard. The man who conducted this new course, known as English 47, or the technic of the drama, was referred to as sensational.

While these wise heads were still shaking Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske produced "Salvation Nell." The public showed its appreciation of the play and the critics agreed that it offered one of Mrs. Fiske's best parts. All acknowledged the merit of the play—that it was far above the average.

The name of the author was entirely unknown to Broadway. When it was announced that he was a young man, scarcely more than a boy, people began to speculate about his stagecraft. Where did he learn it? Then the truth came out. Edward Sheldon was a Harvard undergraduate who had learned all he knew about stagecraft from Prof. George Pierce Baker in English 47.

After their first gasp of surprise many people decided that "Salvation Nell" was an accident, a fluke. They reached a long list of writers with only one play to their credit. Mr. Sheldon's name they prophesied would be added to the list. When "The Nigger" added a second success to his credit the prophets reminded the doubters that even two plays didn't make a dramatist.

The following winter a third Sheldon play, "The Boss," was a Broadway success. Further along the Great White Way "Mother," by Jules Eckert Goodman, had a long run, while down at Daly's Theatre William Faversham did a good business in "The Faun," by Edward Knoblauch. The authors of all three were Harvard men and students under Prof. Baker. After that winter those of the sceptics who were not converted ceased to scoff so loud.

Perhaps there wouldn't have been so many scoffers if the real facts of the case had been known. Harvard didn't of its own motion add the course in playwriting to its curriculum. English 47 was created by students who practically forced the university to establish the course by persistent and increasing demands on Prof. Baker.

Prof. Baker himself disclaims the credit for originating the idea of teaching playwriting as a university course.

"Harvard was not the first university to establish such a course," he said. "Years ago Prof. Alfred Hennequin taught such a course at the University of Michigan. He must have done good work, for I recall that Bronson Howard visited his class and commended his methods.

"The Harvard course is really a growth. It began more than twenty years ago while I was an undergraduate. About two years before my graduation a book on the pre-Shakespeare dramatists was published. A number of the students were interested in the subject and Prof. Wendell told me that I might write a thesis on it.

"Soon after this he began to give a half year course on the subject. It was popular from the very beginning and soon after my graduation he very kindly turned it over to me. Not many years later he turned over to me another half year course, a supplementary Shakespeare course. These two courses I combined, making what is now known as English 14, on the history of English drama.

"From the very beginning my students in that course showed an inclination to write plays. They were continually asking to be allowed to hand in an original play instead of a thesis. I always refused. It was a history course, and besides I didn't feel competent to judge their plays.

"Later there was a demand for a second year's course in dramatic history, bringing it down to the plays of the present day. To supply this demand English 39 was added. In this course the demand from the students to be allowed to write plays instead of theses became so persistent and pressing"—here Prof. Baker twisted in his chair, moving as far back as he could force his body. It is a movement with which all students in English 47 become familiar. Being interpreted it means, "Oh, why will you try to force me to do it?"

"Finally," he continued, "I decided to let them try. Selecting a few in the Radcliffe class I told them they might bring me a one act play instead of a thesis. That was the first English 47. It was entirely experimental and was started because the students in 39 were so insistent in wanting to write original plays. Two years later the university added the course and Edward Sheldon was in the first Harvard class."

It was after the success of "Salvation Nell" and "The Nigger" that the Craig prize was offered. John Craig is the lessee and manager of the Castle Square Theatre in Boston. His friend Henry B. Stanton was one of Prof. Baker's students and called his attention to the work being done at Harvard and Radcliffe and the success of the two Sheldon plays. As a result Mr. Craig offers an annual prize of $500 and a production at the Castle Square Theatre for the best original play submitted by a Harvard or a Radcliffe student.

This prize has been awarded three successive years. The first winner was a member of the Radcliffe class, and her play ran nine consecutive weeks. Later it was produced by Henry Miller in San Francisco and by the John Craig company in Chicago. The second year's prize was also won by a Radcliffe student's play, which ran at the Castle Square Theatre for five successive weeks. The third prize winner was a Harvard play, "Believe Me, Xantippe," which after a run of twelve weeks in Boston was taken to New York.

That the prize has brought handsome returns Mr. Craig asserts positively. The first play he looked upon as a wonderful money maker, the second, though not quite so popular, gave a handsome profit, while the third changed his wife from the leading woman of his stock company to a star in a New York success.

The MacDowell fellowship is the second substantial token of appreciation of Prof. Baker's work for the drama. This is attributed to the interest of Percy Mackaye, himself a Baker student in the early days of English 14. Mr. Mackaye spoke of the work of the MacDowell Club of New York. After an investigation of its methods and results an annual fellowship worth $600 was established. This is given to the writer of the best play submitted at the entrance examinations to the course. This year it was awarded to a graduate of Smith College. Previously it had fallen to a man from the middle West.

The popularity of both the Harvard and Radcliffe classes is steadily increasing. Every year more plays are offered. Submitting a play is the first step toward the course. The best twenty-four plays are selected, twelve for Harvard, twelve for Radcliffe.

At Radcliffe the college has given the class a clubroom. It is known as 47 and is for the exclusive use of those who are taking the course and those who have been graduated from it. Here about a large round table Prof. Baker meets that class twice, sometimes three times each week. Once admitted to the class it becomes plain sailing. Prof. Baker is strictly businesslike. Though more than a year in his class, the writer has never heard him discuss a subject outside the field of drama.

At the first meeting of a class he tells the members, very distinctly and firmly, that he cannot make playwrights of them if they lack the dramatic sense. There are no rules for writing plays. He only can teach them the limitations of the stage and a number of things that a good dramatist may not do. Then after stating that there are no text books, because there are no rules, he advises them to buy, certainly to read, books on play writing by Prof. Hennequin, William T. Price and William Archer. Then he tells them to search out and hand in at their next meeting three short stories each, stories which they would like to dramatize. The hour is up and the class dismissed.

At the next meeting thirty-six short stories, torn from magazines, clipped from newspapers or even dragged bodily from a bound volume, are deposited on the table in front of Prof. Baker's chair. Then Prof. Baker explains about the scenario, and examples of scenarios, good, bad and indifferent, are read. This year Mr. Knoblauch's scenario of "Kismet" was used as the example of good scenario writing. At the end of the two hours—for one meeting each week is always two hours long—Prof. Baker gathers the thirty-six stories into his spacious green bag and again the class is dismissed.

When those stories are returned the class wakes up. The students feel the first personal grip of their teacher. He has read their stories. Now they must make scenarios of the ones he has selected. When those scenarios come in the fun begins. Some of them are read aloud in class; whether they are the worst or the best, the writers never know definitely. Even if they are the best they are never too good for the class to attack tooth and nail.

By this time the students have learned, or should have, what drama is, the difference between theatric and theatrical, what should be contained in a good scenario and a number of the many things which a good dramatist may not do. All of this knowledge is brought to bear on the scenario under discussion. What is left of that scenario, or rather the writer of it, could easily be drawn through a small, very small keyhole. Sometimes Prof. Baker comes to the rescue in time to save the last shred of self-esteem of the writer.

Right here, the writer believes, is to be found one of the secrets of Prof. Baker's success—his ability to find in these first scenarios, crude as they always are, the glimmer of the dramatic sense. Bit by bit he picks the wheat from the chaff. If there are too many characters he shows the reason why; if an anti-climax, he guides the student toward righting the situation. When his criticism comes to a close the author draws a breath of relief and determinedly sets about remoulding the scenario. The class? Well, the majority of the students have decided that they haven't as yet mastered all there is to learn in dramatic criticism.

George Pierce Baker, professor of dramatic literature at Harvard. His students of play writing have within five years supplied the professional stage with more than twenty successful plays.

When the dramatizations of the short stories are well under way the class is required to hand in scenarios for an original one act play. With these scenarios comes the first perceptible division in the class. Students who have done good work using another's plot are not always so successful when required to build a plot of their own. But they struggle along, and Prof. Baker touches them here and punches there, until some very creditable one act plays result.

It is the beginning of the second semester now. The order comes for scenarios for full length plays. The division in the class becomes more pronounced. Students who have done exceptionally well with their one act plays may come to a sudden stop. They will submit scenarios cut into several scenes, but before they get to the work of making the play the class, guided by Prof. Baker, will have convinced them that there is only material for a thirty minute play. Some of them content themselves with making one act plays, others build up their material until they produce something the length of a full evening's entertainment.

At the end of the first year those who have filled the requirements of the course, produced a creditable short and long play, are permitted to take the second year, advanced course 47a. During this year they are supposed to acquire all the little details that slipped by them during the stress and storm of the first year. They can either begin with a scenario of an entirely new play or work over the long play of the previous year. The object of this second year is to make professional dramatists of the students, or failing this to make them see so clearly their limitations that they will turn their efforts to some less exacting field of literature.

Questions are continually being asked about the plays used by Prof. Baker as examples for his students to follow. It would be a long list, and with each play mentioned there would have to be a longer explanation. He orders—though it comes in the form of a suggestion it is really an order, since it is a part of the regular work—the class to go to certain plays. Later he may discuss them in class, asking for criticisms, or he may not. Occasionally he requires written reports.

Not long ago the class was sent to see a comedy of foreign origin for the purpose of finding out why it was successful abroad and not in America. The following week it was a widely popular star whose plays are far from the highbrow type who received the patronage of both the Harvard and Radcliffe classes. The Harvard professor of dramatic literature is a firm believer in the public. If his students have theories for improving the public taste and many of them have, all right, but they must dish out their work as the public wants it.

Farce, burlesque, musical comedy, all come under the head of drama in the course of play writing. So far poetical plays are the only type not admitted. If the public should have a change of heart and demand plays in verse without a doubt the doors of English 47 would swing wide and place would be made about the great red table for as many poets as could hand in acceptable samples.

During the year many printed plays are read, but always those that have been produced professionally, usually those which have had a wide success.

Shocking as it may seem to those who spell art with a capital A Prof. Baker does not always select either modern masterpieces or Shakespeare nor the Greeks for his models. Next after the public the note on which Prof. Baker thumps hardest and longest is scenario. You hear it at the first meeting of a class and at every meeting thereafter over and over again.

Whenever a person does things there are always questions about his personal appearance. To begin with Prof. Baker is somewhat above the medium height and inclined to be spare rather than stout. He has a long face, a rather large, straight nose, and a sensitive, close fitted mouth. He wears glasses and his hair is dark brown. In Cambridge he is seldom seen without a spacious green bag, well filled, tucked under his right arm.

Did you ever see a football skimmnig over a field? It doesn't appear to be going very fast and you set out to catch it. Finally you content yourself with keeping it in sight. If you should meet a man answering to the description just given on Garden street, Cambridge, making the trip between Radcliffe and Harvard you may be reasonably sure that it is the professor of dramatic literature. His football gait is a dramatic growth. It is the direct result of an ever increasing effort from his class to force him to convert a minute into an hour.

At the end of every class they lie in wait for him at Radcliffe, at the door, on the steps, all along the walk and through the college yard, at the gate, down Garden street, sometimes into Harvard Square. A good deal has been said about Prof. Baker's enthusiasm for the drama, but so far little attention has been given the earnest persistence of his students. They come from every State in the Union and range in age from 20 to past 60. Some of them have submitted truly their first effort at play writing, while others have been dabbling in the amateur field for years.

Two years ago the Radcliffe class was made up of women, two-thirds of whom were over 30 and only about one-fourth had ever done anything toward play writing except the play submitted to gain entrance to the course. This year the average age of the class is much lower. When hands were raised to show who had previous dramatic experience only one woman kept both hands on the table.

THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SOUTH AMERICA

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tion for them to shoot with, as there seemed to be plenty of game in that particular part of the forest. We would divide equally what provisions we had—that is to say, three tins of sardines for each party.

As the days went by and we could find nothing to eat my two men lost their courage entirely. They now refused to suffer any longer. They said they had not the strength to go back, so they wanted to lie down and die. Many times a day did I have to lift them up again and persuade them gently to come on another few hundred meters or so. Perhaps then we might find the great river Madeira, where we should certainly meet traders from whom we could get food.

Filippe, the negro, was a great smoker. He had brought some tobacco with him, and he had so far smoked all the time. He said that as long as he had a cigarette in his mouth he did not feel the pangs of hunger quite so much.

Since my return to civilization I have been constantly told by smokers that if I had been a smoker too I might have suffered less than I did. Now let me tell you what happened to Smoker Filippe when his tobacco came to an end on that painful march. Filippe became a raving lunatic and in a fit of passion was about to stick right through his heart the large knife with which we cut our way through the forest. I had quite a struggle in order to get the knife away from him, and an additional strain was placed upon my mind by keeping a constant watch on the knife so that it could not be used for suicidal purposes.

Poor Benedicto, who was of a less violent nature, from morning to night implored to be killed. The two together moaned and groaned incessantly and accused me a hundred times a day of taking them there on purpose to die.

It is curious how hunger works on your brain. I am not at all a glutton and never think of food under ordinary circumstances. But while I was starving I could see before me from morning till night, in my imagination, all kinds of delicacies—caviare, Russian soups, macaroni au gratin, all kinds of refreshing ice creams and plum pudding. Curiously enough, some days I had a perfect craving for one particular thing, and would have given anything I possessed in the world to obtain a morsel of it. The next day I did not care for that at all, in my imagination, but wanted something else very badly. The three things which I mostly craved while I was starving were caviare, galantine of chicken, and ice cream—the latter particularly.

Since my return I have been constantly asked why, when we were starving, we did not eat the grass in the forest; why we did not feed on the leaves or roots of the trees. If we could find no fruit, why did we not eat monkeys or birds or other animals? Why did we not dig for worms and feed on them?

As I have already stated there were no worms in the forest because of the ants, which allow no insect to be underground near the surface. As for the grass, it takes no very intelligent person to see that it cannot exist under the trees of the tropical forest. If a few blades of grass are to be found on the edge of streamlets it does not follow that you can eat them. That grass is usually poisonous. The same may be said of the leaves and roots of trees, even admitting that you could reach the former, which is not the case, as the leaves are usually at a great height upon the trees, and when you are starving you have not the strength to climb up.

On September 20, again without food—for we had eaten up all the fruit the previous day—we worked from morning till night in building the raft. Unfortunately Benedicto stumbled against one of the bottles, which was on the edge of the river; it rolled down the steep bank and floated quickly down the stream, and we saw it disappear, unable to recover it. So only nine bottles were left.

I made the raft of a triangular shape, with two parallel diagonal rows of three bottles each, at a distance of three feet apart; then one set of two bottles. One single carafon formed the bow of the raft. Naturally I stopped up the necks of the bottles so that no water should get inside.

When the raft was finished we placed two parallel pieces of assahy from one end to the other, on which we could sit astride, with our legs dangling in the water.

We had already travelled some eight kilometers on our raft when we came close to the boats we had observed. Their crews stood up in them, rifles in hand, as we floated down. I shouted that we were friends. Eventually they came to our help, their amazement being curious to watch as they got near us. They were unable to understand how we could float down the river merely by sitting on the surface. By that time the raft was almost altogether submerged.

I explained who we were. The strangers could not do enough for us. In a moment they unloaded the baggage from our craft and put it on board their boats.

The people belonged to the rubber collecting expedition of a trader named Dom Pedro Nunes, who went only once every year with a fleet of boats up to the headwaters of that river in order to bring back rubber. The expedition—the only one that ever went up that river at all—took eight or ten months on the journey there and back. It was really an amazing bit of luck that we should owe our salvation to meeting that expedition in an almost miraculous way, brought about by an extraordinary series of fortunate coincidences.

TOURISTS LEAVING CARDS AT JULIET'S TOMB IN VERONA

From the Graphic.

A charming custom among tourists at Verona is that of leaving their visiting cards at the reputed tomb of Juliet. This act, however, must be taken as a pretty compliment to the immortal love story rather than as an offering in memoriam, for it is unlikely that travellers have not learned that the tomb is in reality one of those pious fictions so dear to the sentimental, and that even Shakespeare's tragedy itself is generally held to have no historical basis. A writer in the *Graphic* of London says: "The so-called tomb, of red Veronese marble, in the gardens of the Orphanage, was formerly a washing trough." Another writer is no less severe. "There is plenty to see in Verona," he says; "the cities of northern Italy, without wasting time, money and emotion in looking at frauds." But the custom remains, and will remain, as long as there are tourists.